

AMERICAN ART OF THE 1960s



Irving Sandler

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IRVING SANDLER

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14 EARTHWORKS, MINIMAL ENVIRONMENTS, AND PERFORMANCES

At the end of 1968, Philip Leider remarked that two exhibitions “signal the closing out of what might be called ‘Phase One’ of the adventure that has been called ‘Minimal,’ ‘Object,’ or ‘Literalist’ art.” One was *9 in a Warehouse*, “which may very well become one of those landmark early exhibitions which suggest that a new way of thinking about art is in the air.” The second was the “‘Earthworks’ exhibition at the Dwan Gallery [organized by Robert Smithson], which, via photographs, found artists making piles of rocks, digging holes in the Mojave Desert, or drawing chalk lines a mile long through some California wasteland.”¹ Leider was right in viewing Earthworks as a continuation of Minimal Art. The best-known, notably Michael Heizer’s *Double Negative*, 1969, and Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, are monumental Minimal works—or, in the case of Heizer’s, a negative Minimal work. Like Minimal sculptures, these Earthworks were based on preconceived ideas—ideas imposed on nature—but it was their extreme physicality, or the sense of it, that made the strongest impression. As one of their patrons, Virginia Dwan remarked, “when an artist [Heizer] has moved two hundred and forty thousand tons of dirt around, it is *not* just a concept.”² Earthworks that imposed less on nature also tended on the whole to be Minimal in design.

There was a kind of Earthwork that was primarily conceptual. As his contribution

to *Sculpture in Environment*, 1967, Claes Oldenburg hired union gravediggers to dig a “grave,” a minimal six-by-six-by-three-foot cavity, in Central Park behind the Metropolitan Museum and then refill it. Oldenburg’s “work” had a Duchampian edge; it could be considered an Assisted Readymade. So could other Earthworks and related phenomena, extreme examples of which were Iain Baxter’s “aesthetically claimed things,” which were photographs of existing phenomena in the environment. But such works did not command the attention that late-Minimal Earthworks did.

As I remarked, Minimal objects led directly to Earth Art. Because they lacked internal relationships, they seemed to establish relationships with their surroundings. To put it another way, Minimal objects articulated their outer limits so emphatically that they pointed to what was beyond these limits. This led Minimal sculptors to take into account the environment of a work and how the setting might affect the sculpture, or, as Morris remarked, “change the terms.” The next step might be to put the work outside.³ Struck by Morris’s suggestion, Dennis Oppenheim predicted that the “displacement from object to place will prove to be the major contribution of minimalist art,” adding that artists should find “a more deserving location” than the artist’s loft or gallery.⁴ That location would be America’s open spaces.

Process Art preceded Earth Art in time and influenced it. Indeed, several artists ventured from the one to the other. It was natural for this shift to occur; as Morris wrote, piles or "accumulations of things or stuff" called to mind a "landscape mode."⁵ The nonrigid materials favored by Process artists did not seem to fit naturally within a studio or gallery space; the four walls acted as a constraining frame, arbitrarily limiting its random form. To put it another way, the rigid confines of interior spaces were out of keeping with the spread of amorphous materials. An open, less precious space seemed more appropriate, and artists began to think that the more open it was, the more open to the processes of nature, the better, and they turned to unbounded deserts, salt flats, and the like, using the materials they encountered *in situ*, primarily earth, sand, rock, gravel, to work with. Thus it was natural for Walter de Maria to turn from forming a wall-to-

wall carpet of dirt, three-feet-deep, in a Munich gallery in 1968 to creating Earthworks out of doors. Like the matter used by Process artists, substances found in nature, subject to the elements, were impermanent, indeterminate, and changeable.

Remarks by Tony Smith published in 1966 directed the attention of artists to the potential of the American scene as art or as the ground for art. Smith described his night ride on the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike:

This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done. [Its] effect was to liberate me from many of the views I had had about art. It seemed that there had been a reality there which had not had any expression in art. The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized. There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it.

185. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, April 1970. Great Salt Lake, Utah; coil 1,500' long, approximately 15' wide.





193. Christo, *Packed Kunsthalle*, Bern, Switzerland, 1968. 27,000 square feet of synthetic fabric and 10,000 feet of rope.

194. Christo, *Wrapped Coast—Little Bay, Australia*, 1969. One million square feet. Coordinator John Kaldor.



work,"²¹ but he soon capitulated, making an art film of *Spiral Jetty*, which became the best-known document of an Earthwork. Oppenheim claimed that "the experience of directing the harvest was the main work, not the pictures."²² In fact, no documentation of an Earthwork could convey the experience of walking it.²³

For other Earth artists, such as Peter Hutchinson and Jan Dibbets, photography came to play an increasingly vital role. Speaking of *Threaded Calabash*, 1969, a work composed of five calabash fruits strung on twelve feet of rope underwater, Hutchinson said: "This piece represented to me the use of . . . large color photos as a record and proof that the work was really completed. Looking back I find that it was the photograph that was important."²⁴ By 1970, he was making purely photographic pieces. So was Dibbets, who, in 1968, remarked of his work made with ephemeral materials, such as sand, growing grass, etc.: "I do not make them to keep, but to photograph. The work of art is the photo."²⁵

Because Earthworks were not salable, it was often assumed in the late sixties that one of the motives of their makers was anticommmercial. And in the case of several, this was true; they tried to invent works that could not be dealt with as commodities. The very retreat into the desert of a Heizer, a Smithson, and a de Maria, like Old Testament prophets, seemed to symbolize an escape from art-world fleshpots. As Dibbets said about his sand and grass pieces: "Sell my work? To sell isn't part of the art. Maybe there will be people idiotic enough to buy what they could make themselves. So much the worse for them."²⁶ Not all Earth artists were against shows in commercial galleries, and those who claimed to be, exhibited in them nonetheless. As Corinne Robins wrote: "While an artist such as Michael Heizer felt a moral satisfaction carving out pieces in the desert and thereby 'not adding new objects to an already surfeited world,' nei-

ther Heizer's nor Smithson's interest in making Earthworks precluded gallery exhibitions."²⁷ Documentation could be marketed, and was. There were also patrons—Virginia Dwan, Robert Scull, Heiner Friedrich, Horace Solomon, John de Menil, and Bruno Bischofberger—who subsidized Earthworks. For example, in 1968, Scull commissioned Heizer to execute his *Nine Nevada Depressions*, a series of holes linking dry lakes, which stretched for 520 miles in the Smoke Creek Desert. Upon completion of the project, Scull chartered an airplane to view the work he "owned."

There were other artists related to Earth artists and Christo, who created Environments. A number formed a collaborative group called Pulsa. They were, as Michael Cain, one of their members said,

involved in research with programming environments through electronic technology. The environments we work with are varied: interior spaces, public places outdoors, country landscapes. In each case, a particular system capable of emanating . . . light and sound . . . is set up and controlled through an electronic system that we've designed. All of our work is, therefore, time extended. Generally our environments run from a period of four to ten hours, uninterruptedly, each evening for a period of a couple of weeks to several months. They're usually programmed so that they're different each night. The large membership [ten] of the group is involved in implementing these works, which are very large in scale and, technologically, extremely complex.

Cain went on to say about America:

Our environment is totally dominated by electronic phenomena. Our total environment, at least at night, is electric. . . .

In such an environment, it seems critical to the Pulsa group that a public art form be developed to deal . . . specifically with the experiences people have today, in terms of time and also of space in the world.²⁸

The Pulsa group was included in a show at the Museum of Modern Art titled

Spaces, 1969–70. The other participants were Michael Asher, Larry Bell, Dan Flavin, Robert Morris, and Franz Erhard Walther. The purpose of the exhibition, according to its curator, Jennifer Licht, was to enable viewers to enter “the interior space of the work of art—an area formerly experienced only visually from without.” Thus the viewer “is presented with a set of conditions rather than a finite object.”²⁹

Toward the end of the sixties, Robert Irwin also experimented with space as an encompassing experience. This was implicit in his color-field painting of 1961–63 and his dotted paintings of 1963–65, in which he tried to dematerialize the picture’s literal rectangular surface. In 1966, Irwin began to articulate the interior

space in which a work was placed. He sprayed aluminum disks with pigment that reflected light, extended them from the wall on concealed tubes, and illuminated them with spotlights, which served to dissolve the disks while casting a pattern of interlocking shadows on the wall behind. From a distance, the work appeared illusory—and ethereal. Because they depended on the lit space of the room and the wall for their effect, Irwin’s works were site-specific, enhancing their setting as much as they required it.

Like Earth and Process artists who used nontraditional, easily moldable, temporal materials in a literalist manner, Minimal performers, or Body artists, as they were often called, used their own bodies as a



195. Robert Irwin, *No Title*, 1966–67. 48" in diameter. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

physical substance. Willoughby Sharp wrote that "young artists have turned to their most readily available source, themselves, for sculptural material with almost unlimited potential, capable of doing exactly what the artist wants, without the obduracy of inanimate matter."³⁰ However, because Minimal performers often used photographs, film, video, notes, and other documentation, they were associated with Conceptual Art; Pincus-Witten called Vito Acconci's work Conceptual Performance.³¹

It is noteworthy that in 1968, Serra created a Minimal Performance by filming a work of Process Art. The film, titled *Hand Catching Lead*, was about the process of catching. It called to mind Hans Namuth's film of Pollock in the process of painting. On film, Pollock's creative action became a Minimal Performance; the documentary itself was a work of art.

Autobiography was unavoidable in Minimal Performance. As Jack Burnham remarked:

Body works are probably one of the last things that can happen in avant-garde art. Because once artists totally externalize their bodily activities into a work, and then document it, that's as far as it can go. What every artist is acting out is his own autobiography; in fact all gestural or personal trademarks are autobiographical. As far as I can see, body works say, let's get the fact that art is autobiographical out into the open and deal with it for what it's worth.³²

However, Minimal performers played down personal and subjective references by giving themselves impersonal tasks to accomplish and focusing on the physical action. In 1968, Bruce Nauman filmed himself *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*; his intention was to experience the actual space. In a performance before an audience, titled *Correlated Rotations*, 1969, Dan Graham gave himself and another participant the task of filming each other while circling in a prescribed manner. Then the films were shown on opposite

walls, causing the spectators to look back and forth from one screen to the other in the attempt to recreate the event. Cindy Nemser summed it up: "The artist sees each *I* as extended through the *eye* of the person who holds the camera."³³ The task Acconci assigned himself in *Proximity*, 1970, "was to stand near a person and intrude on his personal space. . . . If he got nervous or moved away, I would consider the piece accomplished."³⁴ Acconci's need to make this early performance piece was to find "reasons to be in a space, reasons to move in space," and his solution was to take "decisions of time and space . . . out of my hands," to abnegate decision-making. "I am almost not an 'I' anymore. I put myself in the service of this scheme."³⁵

In his more physical works of 1970, Acconci set up closed systems by turning in on himself, by using his own body as the "primal" ground for marking. For example, *Trademarks*

was not a public performance. The piece consisted of me, naked, trying to bite as much of my body as I could reach. . . . When a bite was achieved, I applied printer's ink to it so I was able to have a bite print. Therefore, I was turning in on myself, making a closed system and then presenting the possibility of opening that system with the print . . . and sharing it.³⁶

In retrospect, Acconci remarked of his works of 1970:

If an art-work is seen as a target for viewers experiencing art, entering an exhibition space and aiming in, then I can, beforehand, doing art, use myself as target, with the target-making activity made available to viewers. (But, then, if I focus in on myself, I close myself up in myself, presenting myself not as "person" but as "object.")³⁷

In treating himself as "a kind of self-enclosed object [the pieces of 1970] [he] seemed to me almost a kind of last gasp of minimal art."³⁸ From this point on, Acconci's aim was to break out of self-containment. "There is a film I did in 1970 called *Openings*, which is a shot of my